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ABSTRACT

This guide provides information about how middle schools can promote the development and education of adolescents, especially about how they can focus students' attention on career opportunities and training. It also offers families some ideas about how they can encourage their children's career awareness, and it presents some criteria for parents to consider when selecting a middle school or participating in the planning and functioning of the school their children attend. Many middle schools can help students plan for a career, even if they do not provide specific training for a vocation, by exploring interests, aptitudes, abilities and the broad scope of work. Assisting in the development of aspirations and goals and social skills and values helps in career preparation. Career planning can be integrated into the middle school curriculum through general themes in classes and through work-related skills development. Effective instructional strategies can include team teaching, exploratory programs, learning organized around key themes or concepts, and cooperative learning. Parents can encourage their children through open communication about their interests and abilities. (SLD)

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ED 401 351

# PREPARING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FOR A CAREER

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Middle schools are designed to help young adolescents in several ways. The schools continue the learning that students began in elementary school. They support students as they mature physically and face the emotional problems that accompany puberty. They also help students understand how their current educational and personal choices will affect their future life roles, in particular their choices for a career, because middle schools provide youth with the skills, self-esteem, and attitudes they need for a rewarding work life.

This guide provides information about how middle schools can promote the development and education of adolescents, especially about how they can focus students' attention on career opportunities and training. It also offers families some ideas about how they can encourage their children's career awareness. Finally, it presents some criteria for parents to consider when selecting a middle school for their children or when participating in the planning and functioning of the school their children attend.

## Middle School Student Development

The early adolescents (ages 10-14) in middle school are undergoing rapid physical growth and experiencing many new emotions. They are moving from concrete to abstract thinking as they progress in their studies. They are acquiring a self-concept and social skills. They are developing lasting attitudes about learning, work, and other adult values. Finally, they are learning to take responsibility for their education.

## Middle School Students' Beliefs About a Career

Youth who are most likely to think about their future careers, and believe that they have a variety of career options, have high self-esteem and are able to understand and evaluate complex career information. They

have families that help them learn about career choices and support their efforts, in school and outside, to prepare for a career.

But some adolescents have difficulty seeing a connection between what they learn in school, how they behave in school, and how their whole school experience will affect their future careers. Students who are not able to meet with a guidance counselor may not know what they need to do, and which courses they should take, in order to make their plans for the future a reality. As a result, some students who expect to go to college do not take the courses necessary for college enrollment. Unfortunately, poor students are least likely to think about how their middle and high school course choices can limit their career plans later. They may also have less family support because of all the stresses created by poverty.

Unfortunately, many youth have already limited their career aspirations by the time they reach middle school, based on false information and beliefs. For example, many boys may have sex-stereotyped views of occupations by the time they reach adolescence. Girls also acquire these views, but at a slightly older age.

## Career Education in Middle Schools

### Programs

Many middle school programs can help students plan for a career even if they do not provide specific training for a vocation. The most effective programs combine general middle school education strategies with vocational education by doing the following:

- Explore with students how they can successfully live and work in a culturally diverse world.
- Help students recognize their interests, aptitudes, and abilities, and understand adult roles.
- Help students understand the broad scope of work and career possibilities available both currently and in the future.
- Help students broaden their aspirations beyond the stereotypes of gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.
- Integrate vocational and academic education to promote intellectual development, and the acquisition of higher level thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Assist with students' development of social skills, personal values, and self-esteem.
- Work with families to support their children's career aspirations.

### Curriculum

Career planning can be integrated into middle school curriculum in several ways.

***General Themes.*** Organizing the curriculum around themes can promote students' understanding of how their future career relates to their education and the rest of their lives. It can also help them adapt to living in a constantly changing world. Here are three suggestions for themes:

- Understanding self and others, because a positive self-image enables appreciation of a diverse society.
- Forming a concept of work that involves viewing life options in the family/work context.
- Developing positive relationships by becoming a contributing member of family, work, and community.

***Work-Related Skills Development.*** Curriculum can introduce students to the world of work by providing career information and by integrating learning with working. Students can participate in monitored work experiences, pre-apprenticeships, entrepreneurships, job shadowing, and community and neighborhood service. These

experiences can also help schools prevent students from dropping out. An important part of curriculum involving work is support from adults. These adults include parents; school staff members who act as advisors, brokers, troubleshooters, or behavior modifiers; and community and business mentors.

Another way for students to learn work skills is to teach work skills together with academic skills. Academic skills are learned by performing certain vocational tasks, and vocational tasks provide a real-world context for academic skills.

Students can learn academic subjects, integrate the use of technology, and explore career opportunities in the community by studying local hospitals, restaurants, and other places of business that provide goods or services.

### Instructional Strategies

Effective instructional strategies for middle school vocational education curricula include the following:

- Interdisciplinary team teaching.
- Exploratory education where students create their own problems and then solve them.
- Learning organized around key concepts or themes.
- Cooperative learning.

## The Role of Parents of Middle School Students

Parents can encourage adolescent children to plan for a career in several important ways:

- Talk to your children about your own work, and/or the jobs of friends and relatives, so they will learn about several work alternatives.
- Ask your children what they like to do and help them choose a career that is based on their interests.
- Help your children decide whether they should attend a high school that offers vocational training, an academic education, or both.
- Help your children get information about middle and high school courses they will need to take in order to enroll in college or a post-secondary training program.
- Work with the school to provide counselors, career and higher education information, speakers for a "career day," and trips to local employer and employment agencies.

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*This guide was written by Wendy Schwartz for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Please send a stamped self-addressed envelope to the Clearinghouse for a list of other Clearinghouse publications. Information in this guide was drawn from* **Vocational Education in the Middle School**. ERIC Digest No. 155, *published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.*

Other guides to help parents help their children learn can be found on the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) on the Internet. You will find these guides in the Urban/Minority Families section of the Urban Education Web (UEweb), at http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu. You can reach other sections of the NPIN Web through UEweb or at http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu/npin/npinhome.html. The NPIN Gopher is at ericps.ed.uiuc.edu. Ask someone in your local library, your children's school, or your parent center how to see the information on this network.

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